



BAKT II. THE CONCEPT

ii. The Concept

The Middle Persian and New Persian term *bakt*, which designates “lot, share, fortune,” is derived from the root *bag-* “to distribute, allot,” from which is derived also one of the most common Indo-Iranian terms for a deity, *baga-*. As *bakt* is, strictly speaking, a passive participle meaning “distributed, allotted,” its primary meaning was “that which is allotted to man.” Like the modern English “lot, share,” to which other modern languages have corresponding terms, and like certain Semitic terms which have the same basic sense, the Iranian term developed from the sense of “share” to that of “fortune.”

In meaning, this term forms part of a whole group of Iranian words which refer to the effect of superior forces on the destinies of people. Such words are the terms which designate “time,” like Middle Persian *zamān* or *zamānag* (NPers. *zamāna*), *rōzgār* (NPers. *rūzgār*); or words which refer to the heavenly sphere, to the sky and to the heavenly bodies, such as NPers. *sepehr*, *āsmān*, *axtar*, etc.; and in the Islamic period a number of terms borrowed from Arabic (e.g., *qazā’ qadar*).

In Sasanian Zoroastrianism the power of fate, or the notion of the destiny allotted to man, is quite prominent, and numerous literary allusions to this idea can be quoted. In a sense this idea is part of the wider conception of predestination, the idea that most human fortunes are determined before the birth of the individual, perhaps even as early as the creation of the world. This idea does not necessarily have a bearing on the somewhat complicated



question of the freedom of the will or of the possible existence of ethical determinism in Zoroastrianism; at least the wording of the *Gāthās* seems to indicate that Zoroaster regarded good and evil as being the outcome of the free and individual decision of the two primordial spirits and of mankind, and it goes without saying that there is full human responsibility for the actions done by the individual (see, for example, H. Lommel, *Die Religion Zarathustras nach dem Awesta dargestellt*, Tübingen, 1930, pp. 22f.).

It is clear, however, that in the Sasanian view man's life is dominated to a very large extent by the intervention of fate. Fate (*baxt*, *brēh*, *brihēnišn*, which seem to be interchangeable) is never clearly defined. Sometimes the terms indicating it refer to divine decree, but often one has the impression that the power of fate is independent and is subordinate neither to Ohrmazd nor to Ahreman. When it acts on its own, its intervention is never explained as motivated by ethical or religious considerations, and one may be led to the conclusion that this power is morally indifferent and that its decree is arbitrary, which is why it appears in such unexpected and unpredictable a manner. A typical term, synonymous with *baxt*, which indicates its mode of action is *jahišn*, from the verb *jastan* "to jump, to come about without previous warning." The Pahlavi treatise *Mēnōg ī xrad* distinguishes between two separate concepts, *baxt* and *bagōbaxt*. The former is defined as "that which was allotted from the beginning," and the latter as "that which they allot again" (*Mēnōg ī xrad*, 23.6-7). This has been interpreted as the contrast between fate and divine providence (by E. W. West in his translation in *Sacred Books of the East* XXIV, Oxford, 1885, p. 55), but the concepts are not clear. The power of fate was described by the same composition as capable of causing the wise man to be deluded in his actions, and the ignorant to be intelligent in his action, etc. (chap. 22).

Sasanian thinkers sought to define and explain the scope of the effectiveness of the intervention of fate in human life. One often quoted definition says: "The material world (*gētīg*) is (governed) by fate (*baxt*), the spiritual world (*mēnōg*) by action" (Pahlavi *Vidēvdād*, 5.9), which indicates that things belonging to the sphere of religious activity are the responsibility of man, and it is only in mundane matters that fate can have its way and man is powerless. It has been suggested that this formula reflects a borrowing from a Neoplatonic source (cf. J. Duchesne-Guillemin in *Hommages à Georges Dumézil*, Collection Latomus 45, 1960, pp. 102-03). Another text defines the relationship between "fate" (*baxt*) and "action" (*kunišn*) as complementary,



resembling the interdependence of body and soul (*Pahlavi Texts*, p. 94). In another text they are compared to two bales on the back of a mule. An elaborate scheme dividing the spheres of human existence among the various elements which make it up is found quoted in several places in Pahlavi literature (cf. *Dēnkard*, bk. 6, D1a, and parallels, references in S. Shaked, *Wisdom of the Sasanian Sages*). According to that scheme, “fate” (called *brēh*) governs “living, wife, children, authority, and wealth,” while the other sections of human endeavor are allocated to four other areas, called action, habit, substance, and heritage. Fate does not change things radically, it is specified in a number of instances, but it creates the necessary conditions so that an action should be effective.

Some scholars have tended to regard all expressions of the power of fate over human destinies as connected to the Zurvanite brand of Zoroastrianism, but this seems too one-sided and takes out of the domain of “orthodox” Zoroastrianism many works which have always been regarded by Zoroastrians as part of their own literature. It may be argued that orthodox Zoroastrians were not much less given to faith in the overwhelming dominion of fate in the world than those who adopted the Zurvanite myth. It seems, indeed, that the term for fate was venerated as a deity among Zoroastrians, for we have in Sasanian onomastics a name such as Baxt-āfrīd, which means “created by Fortune,” and among carriers of this name there is one prominent Zoroastrian sage of the Sasanian period (see Shaked in *Wisdom of the Sasanian Sages*, p. 283).

Much the same range of ideas about fate and human power is present in the early Islamic literature in Persian, with the variation that the delicate relationship between fate and the divine is here often expressed in Islamic terms. Both the astronomical terms and those relating to decree and predestination are very commonly employed, especially in works which reflect the influences of pre-Islamic Iran. It is emphasized that man’s will and effort turn to nothing against the power of fate. The poetic compositions of Ferdowsī (*Šāh-nāma*) and Gorgānī (*Vīs o Rāmin*) continue the themes and ambiguities of Sasanian literature as far as this topic is concerned. The Iranian Muslim thinker Meskawayh (Meskūya; d. 421/1030) mentions the matters which are obtained through “*baḳt* and fortune (*jadd*)” as pertaining to the happiness of the body, which is part of the happiness of the person, although he mentions that this is denied by “profound philosophers” (Meskawayh, *Tahdīb al-aklāq wa taṭhīr al-a’rāq*, ed. Ebn al-Ḳatīb, Cairo, 1398, p. 92).



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